

Light of Knowledge

by Freelancer Idaho

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Summary: Fifty years after the end of the original Project Freelancer, I was assigned to the Freelancer-II Project, headed by SPARTAN-VI Louisiana. I am Agent Idaho. This is the story of the Agents of Project Freelancer. /AN: Barely a blurb right now, I know, but this will be updated nearly every day. Based on characters introduced on the "Agents of Project Freelancer" page on facebook.

1. Chapter 1

As the Pelican passed through the hangar bay's stasis shields, I heard the engine noise change from the faint whine of space travel to the dull roar of atmospheric flight. The rumble returned, as well- a comfort, as I never felt quite at ease with the smoothness of orbital and interstellar trips in small vessels. The pilot, one of the better ones I had met while in the UNSC, called back, "Sir, the deck officer is here to meet you. He has your new orders."

That rankled. _What the hell is this group pulling? The ship's staff is all UNSC Navy personnel, and _we _are separate even from SPARTAN._ I was jostled out of my thoughts by the Pelican setting down on the landing pad. As the boarding ramp lowered, I walked forward, and grabbed my helmet off the adjacent seat. The deck officer, an ensign, probably no older than twenty, was standing at the edge of the landing pad in full dress whites, and he snapped a smart salute, which I returned loosely. _God, and I thought that this would get me away from the goddamned regulations_, I thought, and I kept right on walking, just to make the ensign keep up.

"Lieutenant!"- the ensign called out. Bad move on his part.

I whipped around. "First off, it's Captain. I prefer Army ranks. Second, you could at least wait until we're out of the hangar bay. It's about to get noisy." Sure enough, right as I finish speaking, the Pelican's engines fire up again, and I give the ensign a pointed look to drive home my point. "Now, if you don't mind, let's head into

the p-way and discuss the standing orders."

The ensign gave a nod, and we walked into the nearest passageway. When the door closed, I held out my hand for a datachip. The ensign looked down, obviously intimidated. Which, while flattering, I didn't really appreciate in the moment. So, I put my hand on the kid's shoulder and said, "What aren't you telling me, ensign?"

The young officer gulped, and said, "Agent Louisiana wants to meet you, sir."

Ah. That would do it. I'd taken the time to read up on the unit that I had signed onto, and it was led by the most ruthless strategist I'd never heard of. Which didn't really surprise me, considering the layers of secrecy surrounding the project, after the last time. Louisiana had singlehandedly planned and executed an assault on a rogue UNSC orbital station, without external assistance, within three days of the station's mutiny. The reason that the information hadn't made it out to the military community? Louisiana took the mutineers and made them into the hardest group of commandos since the old days of the ODSs. The mutineers now served the UNSC Marine Corps as the 909th Heavy Assault brigade, also referred to as the Void Demons, a unit that regularly outpaced SPARTAN cadets in PT with ease.

In other words, the guy was a badass. And for some reason, he thought I had what it took to be a part of his latest experiment. The revival of the infamous Freelancer project.

When I found out I was a selectee for Freelancer-II, I damn near quit the UNSC. Too many bad things had come out of Leonard Church's manipulations, too many lives had been lost to satisfy the bloodlust of that man to make any sane SPARTAN want to be associated with that name.

But after reading on Louisiana, and being assured that there were scores more safeguards in place since the original Freelancer project, I decided to give it a go. It seemed interesting enough, and it promised one thing that would make any SPARTAN drool: lots and lots of combat ops. That's what we were designed for, anyway. Even since Catherine Halsey's betrayal of the UNSC, the SPARTAN program continued, and each unit was more optimized for combat than the last. I was about two generations old at the time, which wasn't saying much, just a few months into my tenure as a SPARTAN, but I could already see the difference in the newer groups. I took it upon myself to constantly upload the latest doctrine data to my neural net, and so far it had kept me ahead of the curve.

I took my hand off the ensign's shoulder, and asked him, "Where is Louisiana now?"

"On the bridge, sir." The ensign seemed even more nervous.

I sighed in exasperation. The ship was of a new design, one I wasn't familiar with. "Ensign, I don't know the layout of this vessel. Much as it pains me to show humanity," yes, I do think I allowed some dry sarcasm to enter my voice, "could you lead me to the bridge?"

Apparently, it set the kid at ease, because he loosened up a lot. "Sure thing, sir. If you'll follow me, we'll tube up there right

away."

"Tube up? That a new phrase?"

"Yessir. The elevators are hooked into a grid system, and it's all done magnetically. It's based on the same principle as maglev railways and railguns, both of which kinda look like tubes. I didn't come up with it, the eggheads in engineering did."

I chuckled. "It's catchy. But we're wasting time. Let's go."

When we reached the bridge, I was totally unprepared for the spectacle that awaited me. There were around ten other SPARTANs present, all gathered around Louisiana. The man was even more impressive in person. Standing at nearly eight feet, huge even for a SPARTAN, he physically dominated the room. A thick, ropy scar crossed his left cheek, a wound I later found out came not from combat, but from a mechanical failure in an earlier version of the tubes.

As I made my way over to the crowd, I passed a series of unfamiliar tables whose functions seemed to be either the ship's targeting or navigation systems. When I arrived at the edges of the group, I spotted a terminal on the opposite end of the bridge that quite literally had my name on it. In flashing red lights. There were several other terminals with other SPARTANs names. I made a mental note to look into this after the meeting.

Louisiana started as soon as I got there. "Welcome aboard the Light of Knowledge, ladies and gentlemen. This is a new Locutus-class battlecruiser, the finest that the UNSC has to offer. It is easily the most versatile warship in the fleet, and it is the most deadly, mainly because of the SPARTANs that it will be housing from this point on.

"You are all members of a special breed, even among our SPARTAN brethren. You have all proven yourselves to be the smartest of the smart, the toughest of the tough, and the ones most willing to make the hard choices and get the job done. So, I got the UNSC to hand you over to me. I have received authorization from UNSC High Command to re-institute the Freelancer Project. You are the first group, there will eventually be fifty of us.

"From this point on, your past doesn't matter. You are all members of my team, and you will all function cohesively. Fighting is permitted, so long as it doesn't happen on the clock and so long as nobody is permanently injured or killed. In fact, you may as well get back used to fighting, because that is our purpose as a unit, people. We are the ones that the UNSC is going to call on when shit goes down so hard that the normal SPARTANs-" there were some chuckles here, to think that he had just described any SPARTAN as normal was comical to all of us- "can't handle it. We are the ones who will run the darkest of black missions. Anything that happens during your tenure in this unit, you will not discuss with anyone on the outside, or I will personally see to it that you can't discuss anything with anyone.

Louisiana looked at each of us in turn. "Your ranks are pointless here, you're all equal. So, I saw fit to restore the special designation of 'Agent' for us. Your names no longer have any bearing on your files except for bureaucratic purposes, so you will go by the

name of one of the old American states. First come, first serve as far as the names go. And don't worry. We won't be deployed anywhere until we get all fifty of us onboard, and that'll be another two weeks at least. Your quarters are assigned already, and if you have any questions, my door is open at all hours. You all are dismissed."

As everyone filed off, I walked over to the terminal with my name on it. I touched the hardlight, and it emitted a soft beeping noise. A blue light washed over my face, and I realized it was scanning me. After passing over my face twice more, the light flickered out, and a dropdown menu of state names came up. After scrolling through the list a few times, I was about to just pick randomly, when I noticed that Idaho was open. Caldera, the planet I was born on, had used the names of old Pacific Northwest cities for its settlements. I was from New Boise, the capital of Caldera. So, feeling slightly sentimental, I pressed on Idaho.

A slot on the side of the terminal ejected a set of tags, marked 'Agent Idaho. Freelancer-II. _Light of Knowledge_.' I slipped the tags over my head, and tucked them into the bodysuit beneath my armor. Looking back at the terminal, I saw that it was displaying the route to my barracks from the bridge. I ejected the datacard that contained the information and inserted it into the pad on my vambrace. Being the first one done, I started off toward the tube.

When I reached my berth, I set down the ruck that held my gear and stepped into the armor cabinet. In the past, these had been manned stations, with anywhere from two to five technicians monitoring the equipment as it removed the armor, which in my case weighed about 300 kilos. These days, using some butchered Promethean technology, the UNSC had eliminated the need for having manned technicians in most places, including a lot of shipboard functions.

As the machine removed my armor, I thought back on just how I had gotten so lucky to take part in the revitalization of the SPARTAN program. After the Didact's defeat at the hands of the legendary John-117 and the subsequent destruction of the Forerunner planet Requiem, most of the UNSC's research and development efforts were turned away from Covenant technology and were refocused on reverse-engineering Forerunner technology, especially that of the Composer, the device that had completely digitized the population of New Phoenix.

New Phoenix. It had only started to rebuild in the past ten years. Myths had grown up around the city in the past forty years, and they only got worse when people attempted to repopulate it. There were mass auditory hallucinations, people claiming they saw huge mechanical beings with large carapaces and skull-like heads. The UNSC knew what those beings were, of course. They were Promethean Knights, the Didact's pawns in the Requiem incident. What scared the UNSC was that Requiem was destroyed decades prior. Where were the digital warriors coming from?

Then came the most blood-chilling episode of all. Five years into the rebuilding effort of New Phoenix, a massive sinkhole collapsed over half of the city. All told, nearly ten thousand lives were lost. There was no geological explanation for the collapse, and those near the area had had the most vivid night terrors documented since the

survivors of the glassing of Reach. A single figure had approached the citizens of New Phoenix in their dreams, cloaked in fire, and said in an imperious voice, "Humanity is not worthy of the Mantle."

ONI personnel drew the conclusion that the Forerunner warmaster that John-117 had defeated had not died in the slipspace event over Earth, but had been transported to some unknown destination. John-117, eighty years old at this point and the Commandant of Corbulo Academy of Military Science, confirmed the description of both stature and voice, and immediately called for an investigation into the slipspace rupture and nuclear explosion he caused over Earth. The investigation was still ongoing at the time I arrived on Light of Knowledge, and had yet to turn up any significant leads. There were rumors of Promethean activity, but nothing had been substantiated.

I stepped out of the closet, relaxing and rubbing my neck. It tended to get sore if I wore the armor for extended periods of time. My posting before my assignment to Freelancer-II had had me wearing it for nearly four months straight. I sniffed the air around me, and gagged. Normally, the bodysuit absorbed all of a SPARTAN's sweat and filtered it into pure drinking water, but that function had been impaired since a Warthog crash in the first week of the mission. It was definitely time for a shower.

I stepped into the head and disrobed. Turning the shower on, I leaned against the bulkhead and let the hot water run over me. Turning to grab the soap, I heard a loud crash in my bunkroom. I quickly turned the water off and sprinted back toward the main room, ready for anything. Well, almost anything. I remembered that I had just transitioned into a decidedly less bullet-resistant state just before I cleared the hatchway. That last-second stop saved my modesty.

The ensign from earlier that day was lying face-down on my floor, with a tray of food spilled in front of him. I called over to him, "Hey, it's all right, just gimme a minute to put some clothes on." Still smelling like a pile of refuse, I pulled my bodysuit back on and re-entered my cabin.

The ensign had recovered somewhat while I was getting dressed, and had piled all the spilled food onto the tray, which he was carrying over to the trash incinerator. Once he had dumped the tray, I asked, "Are you okay? That looked like it was a pretty bad fall."

He nodded. "It's nothing, I take worse every day."

"Really? What on this ship could cause you to fall every day?"

The ensign looked down sheepishly. "I just transferred from engineering. We work around a lot of low cables, and it's dark in the maintenance corridors. I never can remember where the cables are, so I got the nickname Leadfoot from the other maintenance officers."

I nodded. "Sounds about right. Maintenance officers take a lot of shit, so they often feel like giving it back on occasion. You want a new nickname?"

The ensign gave me a look. "How would you make it stick? Everyone calls me Leadfoot."

I shook my head. "Look, kid, I don't know your name, but you've done a good job today. You helped me out, so I'll think up a new moniker for you, and I'll make sure that it sticks. If anyone has an issue with what I come up with, you send them to me, okay?" I waited for the young officer to nod. "Good. Now, I'll have something thought up by lunch tomorrow, so wherever you normally mess, jump off and come find me. If there's some stupid reg about 'SPARTANS- only' or some shit like that, just tell them that Idaho wants to see you. Got that?"

The ensign's eyes brightened, his fall obviously forgotten. "Thank you, sir! You have no clue what that means to me! I'll find you tomorrow." He started off toward the hatchway into the main corridor, and turned around when he was in the hatchway. "And Captain? The name is Andrew Card."

After the ensign left, I returned to the watery bliss that I had been refused for the past four months. Once I was clean, I towed off, then went to the sink to shave. As I started to cut the beard that I'd grown on my last deployment, I saw a flicker of movement in the background, over my bunk. I paid it no mind until I re-entered the main cabin.

What I saw made my jaw drop.

Over my bunk, written in fresh blood, were the words, '_Reclaimer. You are unworthy_.'

On the floor, a pool slowly forming around him, was the still-warm corpse of Ensign Card.

(A/N: So, not bad for the first chapter of my first fic, I think. Reviews and suggestions are welcome, especially the suggestions. Hope you all like it so far! -Idaho)

2. Chapter 2

I woke up in sickbay, with restraints holding my arms and legs down to the bed. Several other agents, including Louisiana, were standing around me. None of them seemed particularly happy to see me awake. I'd seen a similar look before, when I was on assignment to ONI a few years back. The ONI interrogators had captured a member of a colonial terrorist cell, an assassin that they'd been trying to track down for over eight months- she had killed several UNSC Marine officers in that time period, all in particularly inventive ways. Anyway, she was just sitting there, and the ONI interrogator starts using brute force methods. Starts slamming her head down on the table, punching her face. All things that were outlawed years ago, but since when does ONI listen to what's legal and what's not.

The assassin, she just takes it. All of it. She must have had her jaw broken in four places, not to mention a fractured skull. I don't know how she was still conscious. But she sits up, looks at the interrogator, blood running down her face and out her mouth, and she says, deadpan, "You're next," and spits a glob of blood onto the interrogator's uniform. She had the same look that Louisiana had.

I tugged at my restraints, just to test if they were secure. They were. I was impressed. They were taking this seriously. I tried to

sit up, but Louisiana put a hand on my chest and pushed me back down. Hard. "You are staying there, until we all are satisfied by your account of events."

That set me on edge. "What do you mean? There are security feeds for every berth. I didn't do anything except help the kid up when he tripped. I thought he had left my cabin." I looked from Louisiana to the other agents present. I recognized none of them, and they all looked like they wanted to see the color of my viscera.

Louisiana gestured toward a terminal. "Shepherd. Run the tapes for Idaho's quarters."

An AI fizzled into view over the terminal. "What time, boss?"

Louisiana gave the AI a pointed look. "When do you think?"

I swear, this AI looked embarrassed. I had seen some advanced AI's in my time with SPARTAN, but I had never seen one that actually seemed to _feel_ the emotion. Mostly it just seemed like they were running through the motions for us humans' benefit. It looked down and actually dragged its toe, like it was scraping it through some dirt. "Yeah, it _was_ kind of a dumb question."

Louisiana nodded. "Yes, it was. Now, could you run the feed?"

The AI disappeared, and was replaced by an image of my berth, though it took me a moment to figure out where in the room it was situated. It was over the hatchway leading into the bathroom, which was odd, because I hadn't seen any cameras there. Or anywhere, for that matter.

As the holo played, and Ensign Card came into my berth and tripped all over again, I couldn't help but remember the blank expression on his face as he lay on the floor of my bunkroom, that same glassy-eyed stare I had caused to a lot more people than I am comfortable counting, even now. I watched as I poked my head out of the head, and watched as he dumped the tray of spilled food all over again. Then, after I finish talking with him about his old nickname and return to the head, the feed went to static.

Louisiana gave the AI a look. "Shepherd? What's going on here? What happened to the feed?"

The AI looked just as confused as Louisiana. "I don't know, boss. It goes dead for a bit, then it comes backâ€¦" Shepherd trailed off as he scrolled through data, "Here. It comes back here." He pulled the footage back up, and I went pale. It was me, standing over Card's corpse, with the writing plainly shown on the wall. I watched myself collapse, and Shepherd fast-forwarded the footage about a minute, until Louisiana, the other Freelancers, and several of the shipboard security team came sprinting in, all armed. The weapons were all pointed squarely at my unconscious body.

To be honest, it was pretty convincing. To kill the security feeds to this class of warship would have taken extreme skill. And, in the past, I had had to do similar jobs. ONI. Don't ask, I can't say. So, an individual who was known to have the skills to disrupt shipboard systems and a combat record to prove that I had the capability for

exceptional lethality was near a crewmember who died in a way that I had previously dispatched an HVT.

I guess I should fill you in on some of those ONI jobs, after all.

It was three years ago, two years after the New Phoenix sinkhole incident. There were insurrections popping up all over UNSC space, and even some in Covenant territory that I was sent in to deal with. ONI had gotten fed up with losing their intelligence-gathering aspects all over the galaxy, so they decided to get me to do their dirty work. I guess that's what I get, from smarting off to the future head of ONI when I was in basic. But I didn't mind, because it let me do what I was engineered to do: engage and eliminate enemies of the UNSC.

The job that had just come around to bite me in the ass actually was the hunt for that assassin I mentioned earlier. She wasn't affiliated with anyone at the time, we knew enough about her to know that she was just a gun for hire, so long as the money was for killing UNSC personnel. She was holed up in a cavern system on the agrarian planet of Clancy. The farmers on Clancy had come to the conclusion that they shouldn't have to pay the grain tax that was contractually agreed upon when they settled the planet. So they took up arms against the UNSC when the Navy was sent in to collect. They adapted their farm equipment quite well- I was impressed how well they did, to be honest.

They still never had a chance.

The leader of the insurrection was the head of a large farming corporation based on Clancy. I was sent in by ONI to make an example out of him. He had turned his corporate offices into a makeshift military camp, and had his company security filling the role of sentries. It was pathetically easy to get in. I jumped out of a Pelican a mile up and just jetted on in. Once in the headquarters building, it was simple enough to find him. They still had the building maps by every elevator. It was just a matter of silencing the security system. I found a maintenance corridor, and made my way to the security office.

As luck would have it, there were only three guards monitoring the feeds, so it was a cakewalk to silence them. I saw that the power terminal's security was based on biometric data, and then I realized I had kinda screwed myself over. The corpses were still warm, so they'd pass the temperature reading of the scanner. The difficult bit was that, being dead, they had no pulse. No pulse, no switch, so I had to improvise. I cut off the pad of one of the dead guards' fingers, and set it down on the scanner. Then, I dragged the body onto the pressure pad right in front of the power terminal, so it would register as the right weight.

Finally, I pressed the severed finger pad down onto the scanner with my own finger. The hope was that my pulse would be sensed through my bodysuit. As luck would have it, it worked, and I was into the system. I shut down the security system, and jury-rigged an electric fuse for a grenade to the inside of the terminal, next to the circuit used by the power switch. When someone tried to re-instate the system, the grenade would go off, ensuring that the system stayed off, and that whoever tried to access the data, couldn't.

Finished in the security office, I used the uniform jacket of one of the guards to mop up the blood from the finger, and dragged the bodies into the maintenance tunnel I had come in through. I made my way back down the tunnel, following the schematics I had downloaded through the building map. The MJOLNIR suit really does come in handy for that kind of thing. Then again, mine does have a few extras that ONI put in.

When I arrived in the rebel leader's office, he was sitting at his desk, writing a report. Apparently, even when there's a war on, he still had paperwork to fill out.

He was so absorbed in his work, he didn't notice me approaching his desk, until I spoke.

"Staying late?"

He jumped out of his seat in shock, and looked at me with sheer terror. He whispered so softly, I could barely hear, "Who are you?"

Under my helmet, I smiled grimly. I hate it when they ask that. I really do. It makes the kill personal, and that's what makes for the faces in my sleep. But I had come up with a workaround for that. I took my helmet off. For the high-value targets, I always do. If they did something so bad that ONI sends me to remove them, then they at least deserve to see the face of their killer. It's my way of protesting ONI's callous use of SPARTAN units. I set my helmet down on his desk, and looked him straight in the eye.

"Your death," I said bluntly. There's really nothing more that I could say. They know what's going to happen, and they always try to draw it out. To try to negotiate, as if I had the authority to make that call.

To my surprise, this one was different. He nodded, and stared right back. Then he offered his hand to me. Surprising myself this time, I took it. We shook, and he said, "Make it quick."

I did. One quick thrust under his jaw with my knife, and his spine was severed. It was peaceful, in a way. His body didn't fall, but stayed balanced. As I withdrew the blade, the pulling was enough to upset the center of gravity. As the corpse hit the ground, I felt a sense of revulsion. This guy seemed decent. Sure, I didn't know the specifics of his life, and I had spent the past few months fighting his insurrectionists, but he had courage. Honor, even. Not many men could accept their own mortality, their fate, like that.

In that moment, I wasn't a SPARTAN, I wasn't an ONI operative, I was a bystander who felt the need to pass on a message to the rest of the insurgents. I sheathed my knife, and dipped my palm in the growing pool of blood on the floor. I wiped it on the wall until my message was written.

As I left the compound in the leader's private vehicle, I thought about what I wrote. "Give up," I had written. "It's hopeless."

Then the windshield of the transport exploded into a thousand shimmering shards. I jerked the wheel reflexively, and as the vehicle

began to roll over on its side, holes started appearing in the roof. I kicked out the door of the transport and hurled myself out the hatchway, narrowly avoiding being crushed by the rolling vehicle. As the groundcar plowed into the dirt, I hurled myself behind it, to avoid the gunfire. As rounds continued to pummel the car, I cautiously poked my thankfully now-helmeted head out from cover and looked in the direction the bullets were coming from.

I saw muzzle flashes, and used my helmet zoom to get a better look. It was that damn assassin, taking potshots at me. As I shouldered my rifle to return fire, I was blinded by a floodlight from above. It was an ONI Pelican, illuminating both me and the woman who had just been trying to kill me. She made the mistake of firing at the Pelican. She missed.

My shot didn't.

There's a reason I really like shooting just below the knee when I'm disabling someone. First, it's generally a nonlethal injury. Second, it completely eliminates whoever I'm shooting's chances of getting away on foot.

Third, if they're standing properly, it sticks out. It's just too tempting not to.

(A/N: Okay, here's the first half of chapter two! Yes, it's already almost as long as the first, but c'mon, this is writing itself! Return feedback is greatly appreciated! -Idaho)

End
file.